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Abstract

When I was invited to teach a fourth year class at Zayed University in March 2008, I accepted with some trepidation as I am CEO of a small but busy advertising agency and supervisor of a healthcare events company. The three hour per week course was called COM 401: Strategic Planning in PR/Advertising. The class included about 30 students, a number that had grown after an instructor departed and left a vacuum for several semesters. Although the class was called Strategic Planning in PR and Advertising, the textbook I was given was Project Planning, Scheduling & Control by James P. Lewis, a book that I thought more suited to a Project Management Professional course. As a long term practitioner of both PR and advertising, I couldn't reconcile the objectives of the course and the content of the book. I told the dean of communications that I would teach the course provided I could develop the coursework so it was more in tune with the kind of strategic planning associated with marketing. I promised I would show the presentations and accompanying handouts and assignments prior to the start of the class. Thus, I developed 12 weeks of course material and began teaching.

Changing Roles in the UAE Media World: Instructor, Journalist, Marketer

By Sana Bagersh | bagersh@brandmoxie.com

Teaching Strategic Planning

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The class was made up of Emirati girls, most in their senior year. I noted an interesting correlation that is perhaps typical of all classrooms: the closer to the front of the class, the more serious about learning. Those in the first two rows were far more involved than the girls in the back who appeared to have other more pressing interests. Having studied in the US, I was accustomed to serious backbreaking assignments in some of my fourth year classes, and I was determined not to indulge my students with any relaxation of workload or grading.

My mission was to expose them to the world of advertising and PR in the UAE, with local case studies, along with challenges and deadlines that are typical of the industry everywhere. I took materials from my company BrandMoxie and presented cases that the agency had encountered over the years working with government organizations and private entities. I immersed the students in real-life campaign planning that involved creating and implementing communication strategies. I gave the girls assignments where they had to analyze the four (or five) P's of marketing, analyze planning factors and branding, and align campaign output with strategic communications as well as mission and vision. I had them put together marketing communications plans, using PR, advertising, and other channels. We looked at how diverse sectors (government, FMCG, real estate, retail, education, etc.) were translating their business goals into communication strategies. We went through real life scenarios and dissected campaigns that had been implemented or were running at that time, focusing on planning strategies.

As a novice university instructor I got carried away and gave the students so many in-class projects and homework that I began to hear complaints relayed through other teachers (mostly from my back row students). I realized that I could have given them a lighter workload - especially as I became bogged down by the mountains of homework that had to be corrected - but I remained steadfast in giving the girls a chance to learn practical hands-on stuff that reflected the deadline driven pressures typical in most agencies. I thought this would help toughen them up for real employment.

The majority of Emirati communications students end up working for the government as these jobs are more secure and higher paying. In most workplace scenarios these students are now probably helping to execute small internal and external communication projects in-house while bigger campaigns are outsourced to advertising and marketing agencies. Since teaching at Zayed University, I have met several of my students in various government departments and a few private companies. The feedback - and all are gracious in their hindsight assessment - is that the class I taught was difficult at the time but has helped them in practical terms in their new jobs.

Most satisfying over the last few years has been my interaction with young people that I had taught or who had attended some of my presentations over the years at conferences or at other universities. I have come across many who are now capable professionals with the demeanor, confidence, and readiness to make a difference to the companies and organizations where they work.

They are well equipped with vital business skills such as organizing and running meetings, developing strategies, executing briefs, dealing with suppliers, negotiating and working with other teams in their organizations. The one frustration that I detected in some of these young capable professionals is their feeling that they work for managers who are less experienced or capable than they are. Many supervisors seem to lack confidence, vision, or focus which translates into a reluctance to empower subordinates. I think that a capable cadre of Emiratis is taking its place in the communications areas of government departments and that they will soon have greater impact, leading to more sweeping institutional improvements, as they rise into more senior positions.

Introducing Community Reporting

I always tell young people trying to make career choices that the two professions I believe are excellent launching pads for any professional life are journalism and sales because of the skills, confidence, discipline, and toughness that they instill.

I hold a bachelor of communications from the University of Tennessee with a focus on broadcasting. When I came to the UAE in 1985, the job that I stumbled into - fortunately for me - was as reporter for the newly re-launched Gulf News daily English language newspaper. At that time, I was the only Arab female reporter who focused on general stories - social, political, economic, cultural, and so on. Although I was assigned the police and the Federal National Council beats early on, I wrote about everything else as well. The other female Arab reporters in the city - I knew them all - wrote exclusively on women-centric or cultural issues such as the Women's Union or the Cultural Foundation.

My stories covered a broad range of topics from housing shortages to educational challenges, healthcare concerns, and politics. I had the privilege to meet the founder and former President of the UAE HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and opportunities to interact with Prince Charles and Princess Diana, Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, Wilfred Thesiger, Yasser Arafat, Muammar Gaddafi, Kurt Waldheim, Jacques Chirac, and a host of other world figures.

As Abu Dhabi bureau chief in the late 1990s, I championed the introduction of more Emiratis into journalism. Journalism as a career was not perceived favorably because of the long hours and the low pay. To young Emirati women I promoted journalism as an excellent foundational career because of the breadth of the topics and issues to which a reporter is exposed. I always recommend journalism as a start up career because it teaches valuable skills such as researching, interviewing, writing and having the confidence to meet people that can be applied to many other professions.

A British reporter on my staff told me about a community reporting program that he had seen implemented at a newspaper in the UK. I loved the idea, presented it to the editor, and introduced it to Abu Dhabi. It was a wonderful initiative, and we were able to attract about a dozen reporters, all expatriates, who joined the writing and interviewing orientation classes and who soon became a network of neighborhood reporters. In 1997 Gulf News became the first newspaper in the country (possibly in the region) to launch a community reporting program, well before community journalism became popular on the Internet. Around that time I welcomed our first Emirati reporter, a young girl interning from one of the universities. She came to work the first day, uncertain and wearing stiletto heels. In a few days she settled in with the other reporters and was out hunting for news and filing her own stories. She was funny, outgoing, and curious, and had a great attitude. I wonder about her to this day and hope that she has had the opportunity and support to pursue the career of her choice.

Even though I now manage a marketing firm, I am a fervent supporter of journalism and journalists. I believe that every nation has the responsibility and moral obligation to develop and nurture its journalists. They should be reporters who think, question, and present the news and issues to the public fairly and without bias. I believe the UAE can, if it chooses, be a model in this region for quality journalism and freedom of the press.

Founding BrandMoxie and Tamakkan

In the seven years that I have been CEO of BrandMoxie advertising and marketing agency, I have tried to integrate knowledge sharing as a guiding principle. BrandMoxie continually welcomes interns from universities in the UAE; most are from the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), Zayed University, The American University of Sharjah, and the Institute of Management of Technology. Occasionally we also get students from overseas institutions. In 2009 BrandMoxie was awarded HCT's Tamayyuz award for supporting the colleges' internship program.

Most of our interns are Emiratis, usually female, and almost always graphic designers. The majority of the graduates seem drawn to the creative aspects of advertising, less to client servicing, and not at all to the strategic planning side of the business. In my discussions with the interns, I find they envision working in the communications departments of government organizations. Very few think about working in an advertising agency, and that appears to be less related to the long hours and limited pay associated with agency employment. Rather it seems to be about the family's expectations that the graduate take up what are perceived to be higher prestige and more stable positions in government or what are known as semi-government companies where the government owns the controlling shares.

I have come across some young Emiratis who were exceptionally creative and ambitious and predicting that they would soon be running their own ad agencies. My advice to these young people has always been to urge them to learn more about the business side of things before setting up their own ventures. A creative shop faces far greater competition in this industry where agencies provide the full scope of services including strategic and media planning. Through my experience with SMEs in the UAE, I always counsel young and not so young people to work for someone else for a few years, even at little or no pay to develop the necessary knowledge and experience to run their own business.

Tamakkan, an organization I set up in 2009 to promote entrepreneurship and innovation, has provided me with a unique opportunity to learn about the challenges and issues faced by entrepreneurs in the UAE. I established it to support business owners or business wannabees who are seeking insight and knowledge from experts and peers. Tamakkan could be a broad knowledge transfer platform whereby experts, consultants, and academics could give back to the community.

Free monthly seminars, organized at the prestigious Al Mamoura Auditorium in Abu Dhabi, give existing and future entrepreneurs the opportunity to learn from presentations as well as to network with business owners and potential investors. They attract a broad audience of expatriates and Emiratis. Although securing financing can be a challenge for some entrepreneurs, perhaps a greater problem in the UAE has been lack of knowledge to ensure their fledgling project is established on solid ground.

Some young entrepreneurs are already serial entrepreneurs who have tried before, failed, and are moving on to their next business. It seemed to me that the rate of failure has been higher than benchmarked in the US and Europe. This reaffirmed my belief that more knowledge of best practices in marketing, sales, and customer service could significantly raise the rate of new business survival. I became determined that Tamakkan would contribute to bridging the entrepreneurship knowledge gap in the UAE.

Tamakkan was intended to be a non-profit, but I learned quickly after asking for support from government organizations and companies that financial support was not going to be easy to secure because of bureaucracy in some of these entities and the legal complications of contributing to a non-profit organization. After covering expenses for Tamakkan from BrandMoxie's revenue for 18 months, I decided at the beginning of 2011 to register Tamakkan as an organization capable of generating its own income. I am now trying to create a roster of short courses to help entrepreneurs in specific business areas while enabling Tamakkan to sustain itself long term.